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Soviets boost production of tanks despite the sweet talk

By Peter Almond
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Soviet tank production soared to records heights in the first quarter of this year, despite President Mikhail Gorbachev's claim that he is dramatically cutting Soviet military strength.

The Soviets have boosted T-80 tank production from about 3,500 a year to more than 4,200 in the first quarter, according to Pentagon officials with access to Defense Intelligence Agency information.

At that production rate, experts say, the Soviets will be able to effectively refurbish their armored force with their most modern tanks, while simultaneously reaping publicity benefits of retiring older, outdated tanks.

The United States produces about 600 M1-A1 tanks a year.

"The [Soviet] production levels are definitely very high," said one official requesting anonymity. "On the face of it, it is a complete contradiction of Gorbachev's stated intention of taking 10,000 tanks out of service.

"It's possible this is just a boost before throttling back — as Gorbachev said he intends — but we have to go by military capabilities. This is pretty scary stuff."

As part of a package of military reductions he announced in a speech to the United Nations, Mr. Gorbachev promised to retire 10,000 tanks — half of them from East Germany, Hungary and Czechoslovakia — within two years. The Soviet leader subsequently said half the tanks would be cut from among the nation's most modern.

On April 25, a contingent of Soviet T-64 main battle tanks left Hungary, the first of 450 to be withdrawn from that nation. Reductions also reportedly have begun in East Germany.

In recent testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee, Pentagon consultant and military expert Philip Karber, vice president of the BDM Corp., said since Mr. Gorbachev's military cutback announcement Dec. 7, the Soviets have already replaced 15 percent of the 10,000 tanks they said they would remove over the next two years.

Given the Soviets' tank production rate, even before the current boost became known last week, Mr. Karber said all of the 10,000 tanks removed would be replaced by T-80 tanks with shell-resistant reactive armor.

Observers note the tanks so far taken out of Hungary and East Germany are old T-55A and T-64 tanks.

An explanation offered by Pentagon experts is stockpiles at the four Soviet tank production plants are being forced through at a faster-than-usual rate before major cutbacks go into effect with the next five-year plan, due to start next year.

"The general staff may know they are not going to get the new tanks they want after this year, so they are pressing for everything they can get," said one official.

"They have a lot of old tanks. I'm sure they'd like to get them replaced with new ones.

"They have whole equipment sets of reserve stocks. If they think they are going to get fewer resources because of budget cuts, they are going to get as much through now as possible."

Another explanation: If Soviet tank plants are targeted for cutbacks and conversion to some civilian use — with promised new defense budget accounting procedures due to go into effect next year — factory managers don't want to be stuck with stockpiles of unused tank parts.

"Do not underestimate the power of the Soviet bureaucracy," said a Pentagon Soviet expert. "If they are going to be held liable for unused stocks, they are going to get rid of it."

He said the Soviets plan to reduce the defense budget by 1.5 percent this year, 7 percent reduction next year, and 14.2 percent in the third year. But some Western experts said they don't know what this means in practice.

A group of high-powered Americans and prominent Soviet economists, under the auspices of the New York-based Center for Economic Priorities, last week announced efforts to find a common accounting framework for Soviet and U.S. military expenditures by the mid-1990s.

U.S. officials said they must gauge U.S. defense spending largely on Soviet capabilities rather than stated intentions.

"The [pending cutback in tank production] is a very plausible theory" to explain the current production boost, said Mr. Karber. "But it is not empirical evidence. The U.S. military has to respond to military facts.

"The Soviets have said they intend to go for quality. At the rate they are going, their military reductions will merely give them a slightly smaller but much more effective force."

• Warren Strobel contributed to this report.